

A MARCH WIND.

WHEN the clouds hung low, or chimneys refused to draw, or the bread soured overnight, a pessimistic public, turning for relief to the local drama, said that Amelia Titcomb had married a tramp. But as soon as the heavens smiled again, it was conceded that she must have been getting lonely in her middle age, and that she had taken the way of wisdom so to furbish up mansions for the coming years. Whatever was set down on either side of the page, Amelia did not care. She was whole-heartedly content with her husband and their farm.

It had happened, one autumn day, that she was trying, all alone, to clean out the cistern. This was while she was still Amelia Titecomb, innocent that there lived a man in the world who could set his foot upon her maiden state and flourish there. She was an impatient creature. She never could delay for a fostering time to put her plants into the ground, and her fall cleaning was done long before the flies were gone. So, to-day, while other house mistresses sat cozily by the fire, awaiting a milder sea-

son, she was toiling up and down the ladder set in the cistern, dipping pails of sediment from the bottom, and, hardy as she was, almost repenting her of a too fierce desire. Her thick brown hair was roughened and blown about her face, her cheeks bloomed out in a frosty pink, and the plaid kerchief tied in a hard knot under her chin seemed foolishly ineffectual against the cold. Her hands ached, holding the pail, and she rebelled inwardly against the inclemency of the time. It never occurred to her that she could have put off this exacting job. She would sooner have expected heaven to put off the weather. Just as she reached the top of the cistern, and lifted her pail of refuse over the edge, a man appeared from the other side of the house, and stood confronting her. He was tall and gaunt, and his deeply graven face was framed by grizzled hair. Amelia had a rapid thought that he was not so old as he looked; experience, rather than years, must have wrought its trace upon him. He was leading a little girl, dressed with a very patent re-

gard for warmth, and none for beauty. Amelia, with a quick, feminine glance, noted that the child's bungled skirt and hideous waist had been made from an old army overcoat. The little maid's brown eyes were sweet and seeking; they seemed to petition for something. Amelia's heart did not respond; at that time she had no reason for thinking she was fond of children. Yet she felt a curious disturbance at sight of the pair. She afterward explained it adequately to the man by asserting that they looked as odd as Dick's hatband.

"Want any farm work done?" asked he. "Enough to pay for a night's lodgin'?" His voice sounded strangely soft from one so large and rugged. It hinted at unused possibilities.

But though Amelia felt impressed, she was conscious of little more than her own cold and stiffness, and she answered sharply: "No, I don't. I don't calculate to hire except in hayin' time, an' then I don't take tramps."

The man dropped the child's hand, and pushed her gently to one side. "Stan' there, Rosie," said he. Then he went forward and took the pail from Amelia's unwilling grasp. "Where do you empt' it?" he asked. "There? It ought to be carried further. You don't want to let it gully down into that beet bed. Here, I'll see to it."

Perhaps this was the very first time in Amelia's life that a man had offered her an unpaid service for chivalry alone; and somehow, though she might have scoffed, knowing what the tramp had to gain, she believed in him and in his kindness. The little girl stood by, as if she were long used to doing as she was told, with no expectation of difficult reasons, and the man, as soberly, went about his task. He emptied the cistern, and cleansed it, with plentiful washings. Then, as if guessing by instinct what he should find, he went into the kitchen, where were two tubs full of the water Amelia had pumped up at the start. It

had to be carried back again to the cistern; when the task was quite finished, he opened the bulkhead, set the tubs in the cellar, and then, after covering the cistern and cellar-case, rubbed his cold hands on his trousers and turned to the child.

"Come, Rosie," said he, "we'll be goin'."

It was a very effective finale, but still Amelia suspected no trickery. The situation seemed to her, just as the two new actors did, entirely simple, like the usual course of nature. Only, the day was a little warmer because they had appeared. She had a new sensation of welcome company. So it came about that, to her own surprise, she answered as quickly as he spoke, and her reply also seemed an inevitable part of the drama: "Walk right in. It's 'most dinner time, an' I'll put on the pot."

The two stepped in before her, and they did not go away.

Amelia herself never quite knew how it happened; but, like all the other natural things of life, this had no need to be explained. At first there were excellent reasons for delay. The man, whose name proved to be Enoch Willis, was a marvelous hand at a blow; and she kept him a week splitting some pine knots that defied her and the boy who ordinarily chopped her wood. At the end of the week, Amelia confessed that she was "terrible tired seein' Rosie round in that gormin' kind of a dress." So she cut and fitted her a neat little gown from her own red cashmere. That was the second reason. Then the neighbors heard of the mysterious guest, and dropped in, to place and label him. Following the lead of undiscouraged fancy, they declared that he must be some of cousin Silas's connections from Omaha; but even before Amelia had time to deny that, his ignorance of local tradition denied it for him. He must have heard of this or that, by way of cousin Silas; but he owned to nothing defining place or time,

save that he had been in the war, — “all through it.” He seemed to be a man quite weary of the past and indifferent to the future. After a half hour’s talk with him unseasonable callers were likely to withdraw, — perhaps into the pantry, whither Amelia had retreated to escape catechism, — and remark jovially, “Well, ‘Melia, you ain’t told us who your company is!”

“Mr. Willis,” Amelia would say. She was emulating his habit of reserve. It made a part of her new loyalty.

Even to her Enoch had told no tales; and strangely enough, she was quite satisfied. She trusted him. He did say that Rosie’s mother was dead; for the last five years, he said, she had been out of her mind. At that Amelia’s heart gave a fierce, amazing leap. It struck a note she never knew, and wakened her to life and longing. She was glad Rosie’s mother had not made him too content. He went on a step or two into the story of his life. His wife’s last illness had eaten up the little place; and after she went he got no work. So he tramped. He must go again. Amelia’s voice sounded sharp and thin, as she answered: —

“Go! I dunno what you want to do that for. Rosie’s terrible contented here.”

His brown eyes turned upon her in a kindly glance.

“I’ve got to make a start somewhere,” said he. “I’ve been thinkin’ a machine-shop’s the best thing. I shall have to depend on somethin’ better ‘n days’ works.”

Amelia flushed the painful red of emotion without beauty.

“I dunno what we’re all comin’ to,” she said brokenly.

Then the tramp knew. He put his gnarled hand over one of hers. Rosie looked up curiously from the speckled beans she was counting into a bag, and then went on singing to herself an unformed baby song.

“Folks’ll talk,” said Enoch gently. “They do now. A man an’ woman ain’t never too old to be hauled up an’ made to answer for livin’. If I was younger an’ had suthin’ to depend on, you’d see; but I’m no good now. The better part o’ my life’s gone.”

Amelia flashed at him a pathetic look, half agony over her own lost pride, and all a longing of maternal love.

“I don’t want you should be younger,” she whispered.

Next week they were married.

Comment ran races with itself, and brought up nowhere. The treasures of local speech were all too poor to clothe so wild a venture. It was agreed that there’s no fool like an old fool, and that folks who ride to market may come home afoot. Everybody forgot that Amelia had had no previous romance, and dismally pictured her as going through the woods and getting a crooked stick at last. Even the milder among her judges were not content with prophesying the betrayal of her trust alone. They argued from the tramp nature to inevitable results, and declared it would be a mercy if she were not murdered in her bed. According to the popular mind, a tramp is a distinct species, with latent tendencies toward crime. It was recalled that, in the old days, a white woman had married a comely Indian, whose first drink of fire water, after six months of blameless happiness, had sent him raging home, to kill her “in her tracks.” Could a tramp, pledged to the traditions of an awful brotherhood, do less? No, even in honor, no! Amelia never knew how the tide of public apprehension surged about her, nor how her next-door neighbor looked anxiously out, the first thing on rising, to exclaim, with a sigh of relief, and possibly a dramatic pang, “There! her smoke’s a-goin’!”

Meantime, the tramp fell into all the usages of life indoors, and without he worked revolution. He took his natural

place at the head of affairs, and Amelia stood by, rejoicing. Her besetting error of doing things at the wrong moment had disarranged great combinations as well as small. Her impetuosity was constantly misleading her, bidding her try, this one time, whether harvest might not follow faster on the steps of spring. Enoch's mind was of another cast. For him tradition reigned, and law was ever laying out the way. Some months after their marriage, Amelia had urged him to take away the winter banking about the house, for no reason save that the Mardens clung to theirs; but he had only replied that he'd known of cold snaps 'way on into May, and he guessed there was no particular hurry. The very next day brought a bitter air laden with sleet, and Amelia, shivering at the open door, exulted in her feminine soul at finding him triumphant on his own ground. Enoch seemed, as usual, unconscious of victory. His immobility had no personal flavor. He merely acted from an inevitable devotion to the laws of life; and however often they might prove him right, he never appeared to reason that Amelia was consequently wrong. Perhaps that was what made it so pleasant to live with him.

It was "easy sleddin'" now. Amelia grew very young. Her cheeks gained a bloom, her eyes brightened. She even, as the matrons noticed, took to crimping her hair. They looked on with a pitying awe. It seemed a fearsome thing to do so much for a tramp, who would only kill you in the end. Amelia stepped deftly about the house. She was a large woman, whose ways had been devoid of grace; but now the richness of her spiritual condition informed her with a charm. She crooned a little about her work. Singing voice she had none, but she grew into a way of putting words together, sometimes a line from the psalms, sometimes a name she loved, and chanting the sounds in unrecorded melody. Meanwhile, little Rosie, always

irreproachably dressed, with a jealous care lest she should fall below the popular standard, roamed in and out of the house, and lightened its dull intervals. She, like the others, grew at once very happy, because, like them, she accepted her place without a qualm, as if it had been hers from the beginning. They were simple natures, and when their joy came they knew how to meet it.

But if Enoch was content to follow the beaten ways of life, there was one window through which he looked into the upper heaven of all: thereby he saw what it is to create. He was a born mechanician; a revolving wheel would set him to dreaming, and still him to that lethargy of mind which is an involuntary sharing in the things that are. He could lose himself in the life of rhythmic motion; and when he discovered rusted springs or cogs unprepared to fulfill their purpose, he fell upon them with the ardor of a worshiper and tried to set them right. Amelia thought he should have invented something; and he confessed that he had invented many things, but somehow failed in getting them on the market. That process he mentioned with the indifference of a man to whom a practical outcome is vague, and who finds in the ideal a bright reality. Even Amelia could see that to be a maker was his joy; to reap rewards of making was another and a lower thing.

One cold day in the early spring he went "up garret" to hunt out an old saddle, gathering mildew there, and came upon a greater treasure,—a disabled clock. He stepped heavily down, bearing it aloft in both hands.

"See here, 'Melia," asked he, "why don't this go?"

Amelia was scouring tins at the kitchen table. There was a teasing wind outside, with a flurry of snow, and she had acknowledged that the irritating weather made her as nervous as a witch. So she had taken to a job to quiet herself.

"That clock?" she replied. "That

was Gran'ther Eli's. It give up strikin', an' then the hands stuck, an' I lost all patience with it. So I bought this nickle one, an' carted t'other off into the attic. 'T ain't worth fixin'."

"Worth it!" repeated Enoch. "Well, I guess I'll give it a chance." He drew a chair to the stove, and there hesitated. "Say, 'Melia," said he, "should you jest as soon I'd bring in that old shoemaker's bench out o' the shed? It's low, an' I could reach my tools off'n the floor."

Amelia lacked the discipline of contact with her kind, but she was nevertheless smooth as silk in her new wifehood.

"Law, yes, bring it along," she said. "It's a good day to clutter up. The' won't be nobody in."

So while Enoch laid apart the clock, with a delicacy of touch known only to square, mechanical fingers, and Rosie played with the button box on the floor, assorting colors and matching white with white, Amelia scoured the tins. Her energy kept pace with the wind: it whirled in gusts and snatches, yet her precision never failed.

"Made up your mind which cow to sell?" she asked, opening a discussion still unsettled, after days of animated talk.

"Ain't much to choose," said Enoch. He had frankly set Amelia right on the subject of live stock; and she smilingly acquiesced in his larger knowledge. "Elbridge True's got a mighty nice Alderney, an' if he's goin' to sell milk another year, he'll be glad to get two good milkers like these. What he wants is ten quarts apiece, no matter if it's bluer'n a whetstone. I guess I can swap off with him, but I don't want to run arter him. I put the case last Thursday. Mebbe he'll drop round."

"Well," concluded Amelia, "I guess you're pretty sure to do what's right."

The forenoon galloped fast, and it was half past eleven before she thought of dinner.

"Why," asked she, "ain't it butcher day? I've been lottin' on a piece o' liver."

"Butcher day is Thursday," Enoch said. "You've lost count."

"My land!" exclaimed Amelia. "Well, I guess we can put up with some fried pork an' apples." There came a long, insistent knock at the outer door. "Good heavens! Who's there? Rosie, you run to the sidelight an' peek. It can't be a neighbor. They'd come right in. I hope my soul it ain't company, a day like this."

Rosie got on her fat legs with difficulty. She held her pinafore full of buttons; but disaster lies in doing too many things at once. There came a slip, a despairing clutch, and the buttons fell over the floor. There were a great many round ones, and they rolled very fast. Amelia washed the sand from her parboiled fingers, and drew a nervous breath. She had a presentiment of coming ill, painfully heightened by her consciousness that the kitchen was "riding out," and that she and her family rode with it. Rosie came running back from her peephole, husky with importance. The errant buttons did not trouble her. She had an eternity of time wherein to pick them up; and indeed, the chances were that some tall, benevolent being would do it for her.

"It's a man," she announced. "He's got on a light coat with bright buttons, and a fuzzy hat. He's got a big nose."

Now it was that despair entered into Amelia, and sat enthroned. She sank down on a straight-backed chair, and put her hands on her knees, while the knock came again, a little querulously.

"Enoch," she called, "do you know what's happened? That's cousin Josiah Pease out there." Her voice bore the tragedy of a thousand past encounters; but that Enoch could not know.

"Is it?" asked he, with but a mild appearance of interest. "Want me to go to the door?"

"Go to the door!" echoed Amelia, so stridently that he looked up at her. "No, I don't want anybody should go to the door till this room's cleared up. If 't wan't so everlastin' cold, I'd take him right into the clockroom an' blaze a fire; but he'd see through that. You gether up them tools an' things, an' I'll help carry out the bench."

If Enoch had not just then been absorbed in a delicate combination of metal, he might have spoken more sympathetically. As it was, he seemed kindly, but remote.

"Look out!" he cautioned her. "You'll joggle. No, I guess I won't move. If he's any kind of a man, he'll know what 't is to clean a clock."

Amelia was not a crying woman, but the hot tears stood in her eyes. She was experiencing for the first time that helpless pang born from the wounding of pride in what we love.

"Don't you see, Enoch?" she insisted. "This room looks like the Old Boy — an' so do you — an' he'll go home an' tell all the folks at the Ridge. Why, he's heard we're married, an' come over here to spy out the land. He hates the cold. He never stirs till 'way on into June; an' now he's come to find out."

"Find out what?" inquired Enoch absorbedly. "Well, if you're any ways put to 't, you send him to me." That manly utterance, if enunciated from a "best room" sofa, by an Enoch clad in his Sunday suit, would have filled Amelia with rapture; she could have leaned on it as on the tables of the law. But alas! the scene-setting was meagre, and though Enoch was very clean, he had no good clothes. He had pointedly refused to buy them with his wife's money until he should have worked on the farm to a corresponding amount. She had loved him for it; but every day his outer poverty hurt her pride. "I guess you'd better ask him in," concluded Enoch. "Don't you let him bother you."

Amelia turned about with the grand air of a woman repulsed.

"He *don't* bother me," said she, "an' I *will* let him in." She walked to the door, stepping on buttons as she went, and conscious, when she broke them, of a bitter pleasure. It added to her martyrdom.

She flung open the door, and called herself a fool in the doing; for the little old man outside was in the act of turning away. In another instant she might have escaped. But he was only too eager to come back again, and it seemed to Amelia as if he would run over her, in his desire to get in.

"There, there, 'Melia!" said he, pushing past her. "Can't stop to talk till I git near the fire. Guess you're settin' in the kitchen, wan't ye? Don't make no stranger o' me. That your man?"

She had shut the door and returned, exasperated anew by the rising wind. "That's my husband," she answered coldly. "Enoch, here's cousin Josiah Pease."

Enoch looked up benevolently over his spectacles, and put out a horny left hand, the while the other guarded his heap of treasures. "Pleased to meet you, sir," said he. "You see I'm tinkerin' a clock."

To Enoch the explanation was enough. All the simple conventions of his life might well wait upon a reason potent as this. Josiah Pease went to the stove, and stood holding his tremulous hands over a cover. He was eclipsed in a butter-nut coat of many capes, and his parchment face shaded gradually up from the garment, as if into a harder medium. His eyes were light, and they had an exceedingly uncomfortable way of darting from one thing to another, like some insect born to spear and sting. His head was bald, all save a thin fringe of hair not worth mentioning, since it disappeared so effectually beneath his collar; and his general antiquity was grotesquely emphasized by two sets of aggressive

teeth, displaying their falsity from every crown.

Amelia took out the broom and began sweeping up buttons. She had an acrid consciousness that by sacrificing them she was somehow completing the tragedy of her day. Rosie gave a little cry; but Amelia pointed to the corner where stood the child's chair, exhumed from the attic after forty years of rest. "You set there," she said in an undertone, "an' keep still."

Rosie obeyed without a word. Such an atmosphere had not enveloped her since she entered this wonderful house. She remembered vaguely the days when her own mother had had "spells," and she and her father had effaced themselves until times should change. She folded her little hands, and lapsed into a condition of mental servitude.

Meanwhile, Amelia followed nervously in the track of Enoch's talk with cousin Josiah, though her mind kept its undercurrent of foolish musing. Like all of us, snatched up by the wheels of great emergencies, she caught at trifles while they whirled her round. Here were soldier buttons. All the other girls had collected them, though she, having no lover in the war, had traded for her few. Here were the goldstones that held her changeable silk, there the little clouded pearls from her sister's raglan. Annie had died in youth; its glamour still enwrapped her. Poor Annie! But Rosie had seemed to bring her back. Amelia swept litter, buttons, and all into the dustpan, and marched to the stove to throw her booty in. Nobody marked her save Rosie, whose playthings were endangered; but Enoch's very obtuseness to the situation was what stayed her hand. She carried the dustpan away into a closet, and came back to gather up her tins. A cold rage of nervousness beset her, so overpowering that she herself was amazed at it.

Meantime, Josiah Pease had divested himself of his coat, and drawn the

grandfather chair into a space behind the stove.

"You a clock-mender by trade?" he asked of Enoch.

"No," returned Enoch absently. "I ain't got any reg'lar trade."

"Jest goin' round the country!" amended cousin Josiah, with the preliminary insinuation Amelia knew so well. He was, it had been said, in the habit of inventing lies, and challenging other folks to stick to 'em. But Enoch made no reply. He went soberly on with his work.

"Law, 'Melia, to think o' your bein' married!" continued Josiah, turning to her. "I never should ha' thought that o' you."

"I never thought it of myself," said Amelia tartly. "You don't know what you'll do till you're tried."

"No, no," agreed Josiah Pease, — "never in the world. You remember Sally Flint, how plain-spoken she is? Well, Betsy Marden's darter Ann rode down to the poorhouse t'other day with some sweet trade, an' took a young sprig with her. He turned his back a minute to look out o' winder, an' Sally spoke right up, as ye might say, afore him. 'That your beau?' says she. Well, o' course Ann could n't own it, an' him right there, so to speak. So she shook her head. 'Well, I'm glad on 't,' says Sally. 'If I could n't have anything to eat, I'd have suthin' to look at!' He was the most unsignifyin'est creatur' you ever put your eyes on. But they say Ann's started in on her clo'es."

Amelia's face had grown scarlet. "I dunno's any such speech is called for here," she said, in a furious self-betrayal. Josiah Pease had always been able to storm her reserves.

"Law, no," answered he comfortably. "It come into my mind, — that's all."

She looked at Enoch with a passionate sympathy, knowing too well how the hidden sting was intended to work. But Enoch had not heard. He was absorbed

in a finer problem of brass and iron ; and though Amelia had wished to save him from hurt, in that instant she scorned him for his blindness.

"I guess I shall have to ask you to move," she said to her husband coldly. "I've got to get to that stove, if we're goin' to have any dinner to-day."

She felt that even Enoch might take the hint, and clear away his rubbish. Her feelings would have been assuaged by a clean hearth and some acquiescence in her own mood. But he only moved back a little, and went on fitting and musing. He was not thinking of her in the least, nor even of Josiah Pease. His mind had entered a brighter, more alluring world. She began to fry her pork and apples, with a perfunctory attempt at conversation.

"You don't often git round so early in the spring," said she.

"No," returned cousin Josiah. "I kind o' got started out, this time, I don't rightly know why. I guess I've had you in mind more of late, for some Tiverton folks come over our way, tradin', an' they brought all the news. It sort o' stirred me up to come."

Amelia turned her apples vigorously, conscious that the slices were breaking. That made a part of her bitter day.

"Folks need n't take the trouble to carry news about me," said she. There was an angry gleam in her eyes. "If anybody wants to know anything, let 'em come right here, an' I'll settle 'em." The ring of her voice penetrated even to Enoch's perception, and he looked up in mild surprise. She seemed to have thrown open, for an instant, a little window into a part of her nature he had never seen.

"How good them apples smell!" said Josiah innocently. "Last time I had 'em was down to cousin Amasa True's, — he that married his third wife, an' she run through all he had. I went down to see 'em arter the vandoo, — you know they got red o' 'most everything, — an'

they had fried pork an' apples for dinner. Old Bashaby dropped in. 'Law!' says she. 'Fried pork an' apples! Well, I call that livin' pretty nigh the wind!'" Josiah chuckled. He was very warm now, and the savory smell of the dish he decried was mounting to what served him for fancy. "'Melia, you ain't never had your teeth out, have ye?" he asked, as one who spoke from richer memories.

"I guess my teeth 'll last me as long as I want 'em," replied Amelia curtly.

"Well, I did n't know. They looked real white an' firm last time I see 'em, but you never can tell how they be underneath. I knew the folks would ask me, when I got home. I thought I'd speak."

"Dinner's ready," said Amelia. She turned an alien look upon her husband. "You want to wash your hands?"

Enoch rose cheerfully. He had got to a hopeful place with the clock.

"Set ri' down," he said. "Don't wait a minute. I'll be along."

So Amelia and the guest took their seats, while little Rosie climbed, rather soberly, into her higher chair, and held out her plate.

"You wait," commanded Amelia harshly. "Can't you let other folks eat a mouthful before you have to have yours?" Yet, as she said it, she remembered, with a remorseful pang, that she had always helped the child first; it had been so sweet to see her pleased and satisfied.

Josiah was not a talkative man during meals. As he was not absolute master of his teeth, his mind dwelt with them. Amelia considered that, with a malicious satisfaction. But he could not be altogether dumb. That, people said, would never happen to Josiah Pease while he was aboveground.

"That his girl?" he asked, indicating Rosie with his knife, in a gustatory pause.

"Whose?" inquired Amelia willfully.

"His." He pointed again, this time

to the back room, where Enoch was still washing his hands.

"Yes."

"Mother dead?"

Amelia sprang from her chair, while Rosie looked at her with the frightened glance of a child to whom some half-forgotten grief has suddenly returned.

"Josiah Pease!" cried Amelia. "I never thought a poor insignificant creatur' like you could rile me so, — when I know what you're doin' it for, too. But you've brought it about. Her mother dead? Ain't I been an' married her father?"

"Law, 'Melia, do se' down," said Josiah indulgently. There was a mince pie warming on the back of the stove. He saw it. "I did n't mean nuthin'. I'll be bound you thought she's dead, or you would n't ha' took such a step. I only meant, did ye see her death in the paper, for example, or anything like that?"

"'Melia," called Enoch from the doorway, "I won't come in to dinner jest now. Elbridge True's drove into the yard. I guess he's got it in mind to talk it over about them cows. I don't want to lose the chance."

"All right," answered Amelia. She took her seat again, while Enoch's footsteps went briskly out through the shed. With the clanging of the door she felt secure. If she had to deal with Josiah Pease, she could do it better alone, clutching at the certainty that was with her from of old, that, if you could only keep your temper with cousin Josiah, you had one chance of victory. Flame out at him, and you were lost. "Some more potatoes?" asked she, with a deceptive calm.

"Don't care if I do," returned Josiah, selecting greedily, his fork hovering in air. "Little mite watery, ain't they? Dig 'em yourself?"

"We dug 'em," she said coldly.

Rosie stepped down from her chair, unnoticed. To Amelia, she was then

no bigger than some little winged thing flitting about the room in time of tragedy. Our greatest emotions sometimes stay unnamed. At that moment Amelia was swayed by as tumultuous a love as ever animated damsel of verse or story; but it merely seemed to her that she was an ill-used woman, married to a man for whom she was called on to be ashamed. Rosie tiptoed into the entry, put on her little shawl and hood, and stole out to play in the corn house. When domestic squalls were gathering, she knew where to go. The great outdoors was safer. Her past had taught her that.

"Don't like to eat with folks, does he? Well, it's all in what you're brought up to."

Amelia was ready with her counter-charge. "Have some tea?"

She poured it as if it were poison, and Josiah became conscious of her tragic self-control.

"You ain't eat a thing," said he, with an ostentatious kindliness. He bent forward a little, with the air of inviting a confidence. "Got suthin' on your mind, ain't you, 'Melia?" he whispered. "Kind o' worried? Find he's a drinkin' man?"

She was not to be beguiled, even by that anger which veils itself as justice. She looked at him steadily, with scorching eyes.

"You ain't took any sugar," she returned. "There 't is, settin' by you. Help yourself."

Josiah addressed himself to his tea, and then Amelia poured him another cup. She had some fierce satisfaction in making it good and strong. It seemed to her that she was heartening her adversary for the fray, and she took pleasure in doing it effectually. So great was the spirit within her that she knew he could not be too valiant, for her keener joy in laying him low. Then they rose from the table, and Josiah took his old place by the stove, while

Amelia began carrying the dishes to the sink. Her mind was a little hazy now; her next move must depend on his, and cousin Josiah, somewhat drowsy from his good dinner, was not at once inclined to talk. Suddenly he raised his head snakily from those sunken shoulders, and pointed a lean finger to the window.

"'Melia!" cried he sharply. "I'll be buttered if he ain't been and traded off both your cows. My Lord! be you goin' to stan' there an' let them two cows go?"

Amelia gave one swift glance from the window, following the path marked out by that insinuating index. It was true. Elbridge was driving her two cows out of the yard, and her husband stood by, watching him. She walked quietly into the entry, and Josiah laid his old hands together in the rapturous certainty that she was going to open the door and send her anger forth. But she only took down his butternut coat from the nail on which it hung, and returned with it, holding it ready for him to insert his arms.

"Here's your coat," said she, with that strange, deceptive calmness. "Stand up, an' I'll help you put it on."

Josiah looked at her, with helplessly open mouth, and with eyes so vacuous that she felt the grim humor of his plight.

"I was in hopes he'd harness up" — he began; but she ruthlessly cut him short.

"Stand up! Here, put t'other arm in fust. This han'kercher yours? Goes round your neck? There't is. Here's your hat. Got any mittens? There they be, in your pocket. This way. This is the door you come in, an' this is the door you'll go out of." She preceded him, her head thrown up, her shoulders back. Amelia had no idea of dramatic values, but she was playing an effective part. She reached the door and flung it open; but Josiah, a poor figure in its huddled capes, still stood abjectly

in the middle of the kitchen. "Come!" she called peremptorily. "Come, Josiah Pease! Out you go!" And Josiah went, though, contrary to his usual habit, he did not talk. He quavered uncertainly down the steps, and Amelia called a halt. "Josiah Pease!"

He turned and looked up at her. His jaw had dropped, and he was nothing but a very helpless old child. Vicious as he was, Amelia realized the mental poverty of her adversary, and despised herself for despising him. "Josiah Pease!" she repeated. "This is the end. Don't you darken my doors ag'in. I've done with you, — egg an' bird!" She closed the door, shutting out Josiah and the keen spring wind, and went back to the window, to watch him down the drive. His back looked poor and mean. It emphasized the pettiness of her victory. She realized that it was the poorer part of her which had resented attack on a citadel that should be as impregnable as time itself. Enoch stepped into the kitchen just then, and his voice jarred upon her tingling nerves.

"Well," said he, more jovially than he was wont to speak, "I guess I've made a good trade for ye. Company gone? Come here an' se' down while I eat, an' I'll tell ye all about it."

Amelia turned about and walked slowly up to him, by no volition of her conscious self. Again, love, that august creature, veiled itself in an unjust anger, because it was love, and nothing else.

"You've made a good bargain, have you?" she retorted. "You've sold my cows, and had 'em drove off the place without if or but. That's what you call a good bargain!" Her voice frightened her. It amazed the man who heard. These two middle-aged people were waking up to passions neither had felt in youth. Life was strong in them, because love was there.

"Why, 'Melia!" repeated the man. "Why, 'Melia!"

Amelia was hurried on before the

wind of her destiny. Her voice grew sharper. Little white stripes, like the lashes from a whip, showed themselves on her cheeks. She seemed to be speaking from a dream, which left her no will save that of speaking.

"It's been so ever sence you set foot in this house. Have I had my say once? Have I been mistress on my own farm? No! You took the head of things, an' you've kep' it. What's mine is yours."

Her triumph over Josiah repeated itself grotesquely; the scene was almost identical. The man before her stood with his hands hanging by his sides, the fingers limp, in an attitude of the profoundest patience. He was thinking things out: she knew that. Her hurrying mind anticipated all he might have said, and would not. And because he had too abiding a gentleness to say it, the insanity of her anger rose anew.

"I'm the laughin'-stock o' the town," she went on bitterly. "There ain't a man or woman in it that don't say I've married a tramp."

Enoch winced, with a sharp, brief quiver of the lips; but before she could dwell upon the sight, to the resurrection of her tenderness, he turned away from her and went over to the bench.

"I guess I'll move this back where 't was," he said in a very still voice; and Amelia stood watching him, conscious of a new and bitterer pang, — a fierce contempt that he could go on with his poor, methodical way of living, when greater issues waited at the door. He moved the bench into its old place, gathered up the clock with its dismantled machinery, and carried it into the attic. She heard his steps on the stairs, regular and unhalting, and despised him again; but in all those moments the meaning of his movements had not struck her. When he came back he brought in the broom; and while he swept up the fragments of his work Amelia still stood and watched him. He put the dustpan and broom away in their places, but did not reënter

the room. He spoke to her from the doorway, and she could not see his face.

"I guess you won't mind if I leave the clock as 'tis. It needs some new cogs, an' if anybody should come along, he would n't find it any the worse for what I've done. I've jest thought it over about the cows, an' I guess I'll leave that, too, jest as it is. I made you a good bargain, an' when you come to mull it over, I guess you'd rather it'd stan' so than run the resk of havin' folks make a handle of it. Good-by, 'Melia. You've been good to me, — better 'n anybody ever was in the world."

She heard his step, swift and steady, through the shed and out at the door. He was gone. She turned toward the window to look after him, and then, finding he had not taken the driveway, she ran into the bedroom, to gaze across the fields. There he was, a lonely figure striking vigorously out. He seemed glad to go; and, seeing his haste, her heart hardened against him. She gave a little disdainful laugh.

"Well," said Amelia, "*that's* over. I'll wash my dishes now."

Coming back into the kitchen with an assured step, she moved calmly about her work, as if the world were there to see. Her pride enveloped her like a garment. She handled the dishes as if she scorned them, yet her care and method were exquisite. Presently there was a little imperative pounding at the side door. It was Rosie. She had forgotten the cloudy atmosphere of the house, and, being cold, had come, in all her old imperious certainty of love and warmth, to be let in. Amelia stopped short in her work, and an ugly frown roughened her brow. Josiah Pease, with his evil imaginings, seemed to be at her side, his lean forefinger pointing out the baseness of mankind. Now, indeed, she realized where Enoch had gone. He meant to take the three o'clock train where it halted, down at the Crossing, and he had left the child behind. Tear-

ing off her apron, she threw it over her head. She ran to the door, and, opening it, almost knocked the child down, in her haste to be out and away. Rosie had lifted her frosty face in a smile of welcome, but Amelia did not see it. She gathered the child in her arms, and hurried down the steps, through the bars, and along the narrow path toward the pine woods. The sharp brown stubble of the field merged into the thin grasses of the greener lowland, and she heard the trickling of the little dark brook, where gentians lived in the fall, and where, still earlier, the cardinal flower and forget-me-not crowded in lavish color. She knew every inch of the way; her feet had an intelligence of their own. The farm was a part of her inherited life; but at that moment she prized it as nothing beside that newly discovered wealth which she was rushing to cast away. Rosie had not striven in the least against her capture; she knew too much of life, in some patient fashion, to resist it in any of its phases. She put her arms about Amelia's neck, to cling the closer, and Amelia, turning her face while she staggered on, set her lips passionately to the little sleeve.

"You cold," asked she, "*dear?*" But she told herself it was a kiss of farewell.

She stepped deftly over the low stone wall into the Marden woods, and took the slippery downward path, over pine needles. Sometimes a rounded root lay above the surface, and she stumbled on it; but the child only tightened her grasp. Amelia walked and ran with the prescience of those without fear; for her eyes were unseeing, and, her thoughts hurrying forward, she depicted to herself the little drama at its close. She would be at the Crossing and away again before the train came in; nobody need guess her trouble. Enoch must be there, waiting. She would drop the child at his side, the child he had deserted, and before he could say a word turn back to

her desolate home. And at the thought she kissed the little sleeve again, and felt how good it would be if she could only stand once more, though alone, within the shielding walls of her house, and the parting were over and done. She felt her breath come chokingly.

"You'll have to walk a minute," she whispered, setting down the child. "There's time enough. I can't hurry."

At that instant she felt the slight warning of the ground beneath her feet, shaken by another step, and saw, through the pines, her husband running toward her. Rosie started to meet him, with a little cry, but Amelia thrust her aside, and hurried swiftly on in advance, her eyes feeding upon his face. It was piteously changed.

Sorrow, the great despair of life, had eaten into it, and aged it more than years of patient want. His eyes were like lamps burned low, and the wrinkles under them had guttered into misery. But to Amelia his look had all the sweet familiarity of faces we shall see in paradise. She did not stop to interpret his meeting glance, nor ask him to read hers. Coming upon him like a whirlwind, she put both her shaking hands on his shoulders and laid her wet face to his.

"Enoch! Enoch!" she cried sharply. "In the name of God, come home with me!"

She felt him trembling under her hands, but he only put up his own and very gently loosed the passionate grasp. "There! there!" he said in a whisper. "Don't feel so bad. It's all right. I jest turned back for Rosie. Mebbe you won't believe it, but I forgot all about her."

He lowered his voice, for Rosie had gone close to him and set her hands clingingly to his coat. She did not understand, but she could wait. A branch had almost barred the path, and Amelia, her dull gaze fallen, noted idly how bright the moss had kept and how the scarlet cups enriched it. Her strength

would not sustain her, void of his, and she sank down on the wood, her hands laid limply in her lap.

"Enoch," she implored, from her new sense of the awe of life, "don't lay up anything ag'inst me. You could n't, if you knew."

"Knew what?" asked Enoch gently. He did not forget that circumstance had struck a blow at the roots of his being; but he could not turn away while she still suffered.

Amelia began stumbly: "He talked about you. I could n't stan' it."

"Did you believe it?" he queried sternly.

"There wan't anything to believe. That's neither here nor there. But — Enoch, if anybody should cut my right hand off — Enoch" — Her voice fell brokenly. She was a New England woman, accustomed neither to analyze nor to talk. She could only suffer in the elemental way of dumb things who sometimes need a language of the heart. One thing she knew: the man was hers; and if she reft herself away from him, then she must die.

He had taken Rosie's hand, and Amelia was aware that he turned away.

"I don't want to bring up anything," he said hesitatingly, "but I could n't stand bein' any less 'n other men would, jest because the woman had the money, an' I had n't. I dunno's 't was exactly fair about the cows, but somehow you kind o' set me at the head o' things in the beginnin', an' it never come into my mind" —

Amelia sat looking wanly past him. She began to see how slightly argument would serve. All at once the conventions of life fell away from her, and left her young.

"Enoch," she said vigorously, "you've got to take me; somehow, you've got to. Talkin' won't make you see that what I said never meant no more than the wind that blows. But you've got to keep me, or remember all your life how you mur-

dered me by goin' away. The farm's come between us. Le's leave it! It's 'most time for the cars. You take me with you. If you tramp, I'll tramp. If you work out, so'll I. But where you go, I've got to go too."

Some understanding of her began to creep upon him; he dropped the child's hand, and came a step nearer. Enoch, in these latter days of his life, had forgotten how to smile; but now a sudden mirthful gleam struck upon his face, and lighted it with the candles of hope. He stood beside her, and Amelia did not look at him.

"Would you go with me, 'Melia?" he asked.

"I'm goin'," said she doggedly. Her case had been lost, but she could not abandon it. She seemed to be holding to it in the face of righteous judgment.

"S'pose I don't ask you?"

"I'll foller on behind."

"Don't you want to go home, an' lock up, an' git a bunnit?"

She put one trembling hand to the calico apron about her head. "No."

"Don't you want to leave the key with some o' the neighbors?"

"I don't want anything in the world but you," owned Amelia shamelessly.

Enoch bent quickly, and drew her to her feet. "'Melia," said he, "you look up here."

She raised her drawn face and looked at him, not because she wished, but because she must. In her abasement, there was no obedience she would deny him. But she could only see that he was strangely happy, and so the more removed from her own despair. Enoch swiftly passed his arm about her and turned her homeward. He laughed a little. Being a man, he must laugh, when that bitter ache in the throat presaged more bitter tears.

"Come, 'Melia," said he, "come along home, an' I'll tell you all about the cows. I made a real good bargain. Come, Rosie."

Amelia could not answer. It seemed to her as if love had dealt with her as she had not deserved; and she went on, exalted, afraid of breaking the moment, and conscious only that he was hers again. But just before they left the shadow of the woods he stopped, holding her still, and their hearts beat together.

"'Melia," said he brokenly, "I guess I never told you in so many words, but it's the truth: if God Almighty was to make me a woman, I'd have her you, not a hair altered. I never cared a straw for any other: I know that now. You're all there is in the world."

When they walked up over the brown field, the sun lay very warmly there with a promise of spring fulfilled. The wind had miraculously died, and soft clouds ran over the sky in flocks. Rosie danced on ahead, singing her queer little song, and Enoch struggled with himself to speak the word his wife might wish.

"'Melia," said he at last, "there ain't anything in my life I could n't tell you. I jest ain't dwelt on it, — that's all. If you want to have me go over it" —

"I don't want anything," answered

Amelia firmly. Her eyes were suffused, and yet lambent. The light in them seemed to be drinking up their tears. Her steps, she knew, were set within a shining way. At the door only she paused, and fixed him with a glance. "Enoch," said she threateningly, "whose cows were them you sold to-day?"

He opened his lips, but she looked him down. One word he rejected, and then another. His face wrinkled up into obstinate laughter, and he made the wry face of a child over its bitter draught.

"'Melia, it ain't fair," he complained. "No, it ain't. I'll take one of 'em, if you say so, or I'll own it don't make a mite o' difference whose they be. But as to lyin'" —

"Say it!" commanded Amelia. "Whose were they?"

"Mine!" said Enoch.

They broke into laughter, like children, and held each other's hands.

"I ain't had a mite o' dinner," declared Amelia happily, as they stepped together into the kitchen. "Nor you. An' Rosie did n't eat her pie. You blaze up the fire, an' I'll fry some eggs."

Alice Brown.